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Grasp the pattern, read the trend

Asia in Review

(1/8/2018)

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Dear Reader,

CPG is presenting you the first August issue of CPG's Asia in Review (AiR) 2018 with an update on the latest developments in law, politics and international relations in Asia.

I hope you enjoy an informative reading.

Best regards,

Henning Glaser

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Webpage: www.cpg-online.de, Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/CPGTU/

Main Sections

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Law and Politics in East Asia

China: Surveillance on Muslim minority expanded?

(dql) State-run newspaper Global Times announced that Chinese Muslims travelling in official groups to Mecca and Medina for this year's hajj (19-24 August) are provided GPS tracking devices containing photo, passport number and name of the pilgrim. While the China Islamic Association, organizer of the pilgrimage, stressed that the devices help increase safety of the pilgrims [Global Times], human rights advocates denounced them as surveillance tools and another measure of China's comprehensive efforts to monitor its Muslim minority. [Wall Street Journal]

South Korea: New military intelligence unit to be formed amid martial law plan investigation

(dql) Amid ongoing investigations into the masterminds of plans of the Defense Security Command (DSC), South Korea's military intelligence unit, to evoke martial law to violently suppress the 2017 candlelight protests against then President Park Geun-hye [Air 5/7/2108], the Defense Ministry

launched a special task force in charge of forming a new military intelligence unit to replace the DSC by Sept. 1. [Korea Times] According to the head of the DSC reform panel, the reform would bring an end "to the DSC's illegal political interference, surveillance over innocent civilians and misguided sense of privilege over other military branches." [Korea Herald]

Prior to this step, President Moon Jae-in appointed Lt. Gen. Nam Young-sin, the current commander of the Army's Special Warfare Command, to replace Lt. Gen. Lee Suk-koo, DSC commander since September last year. [Yonhap]

South Korea: Investigations into judiciary power abuse

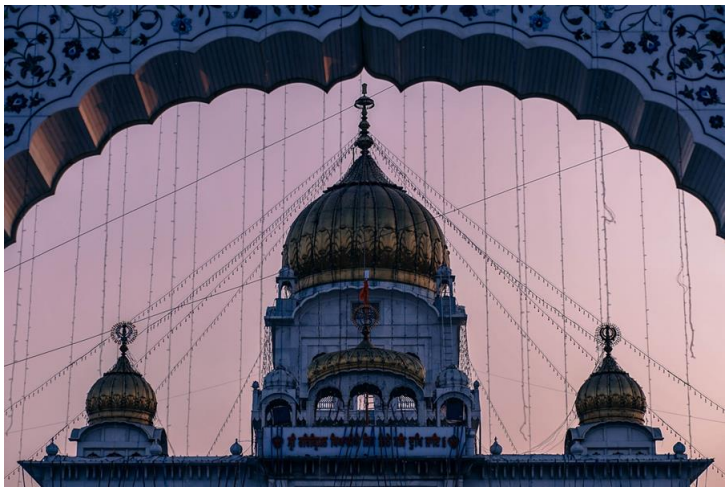
(dql) Headquarters of South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs were raided in the frame of an investigations into allegations that former Supreme Court Chief Justice Yang Sung-tae and the National Court Administration (NCA), the administrative body of the court, tried to use politically sensitive trials as bargaining chips for favours from the Park administration for his plan to establish a new court of appeal. Among the trials under suspicion is a compensation suit filed by Korean victims of Japan's forced labor during World War II against two Japanese firms. The Supreme Court had already decided the case in favour of the victims in 2012. However, its re-appeal had been pending at the court for unclear reasons until the resumption of the hearing last year. The prosecution suspects that Yang proposed to the Foreign Ministry a ruling in their favour in return for providing judges more opportunities for state-funded overseas studies. In 2015 the conservative Park government concluded an agreement with Tokyo under which Korea will no longer seek an apology from Japan for the 1910-45 colonial rule in return for a 8.95 million USD provision. [Yonhap 1]

Prior to the raid, an internal probe of the court brought to light more than 400 documents related to the court's alleged wrongdoings, including pressuring judges to rule in favour of the president's office. [Yonhap 2]

Japan: Ruling party pushes for organizational reform of ministries and government agencies

(dql) The ruling Liberal Democratic Party decided to propose a reorganisation of the current 13 ministries and government agencies. Particularly targeted is the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, considered a colossal bureaucracy with an extensive portfolio incapable of responding to the complex needs of an ageing society. The reform plan comes after a series of scandals involving central government entities, including the now-defunct Social Insurance Agency, a unit under the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, which failed to keep proper records of more than 50 million pension accounts. [Nikkei Asian Review] [Mainichi]

Law and Politics in South Asia



India's Jammu and Kashmir sees strikes and protests ahead of Supreme Court's hearing on special status

(am) The Constitution of India integrated Article 35A by a 1954 Presidential Order consenting Jammu and Kashmir government to outline its 'permanent residents' and give them constitutional rights and civil liberties. A Supreme Court hearing asking to review its constitutional legitimacy will take place this week. As per activists, Article 35A, which acts in the Constitution as an addendum, was only thought to be a "short-term provision". [HT]

Before the Supreme Court enquiry on Jammu and Kashmir's special status of Article 35 A, the state has seen protests to terminate the petition at the Supreme Court. The Jammu and Kashmir government on Saturday moved towards the apex court and

requested a delay in the hearing, mentioning municipal elections in the state. [India.com]

India: Supreme Court to have 3 serving female judges for the first time

(am) The Supreme Court of India for the first time will have three serving female judges, after the central government cleared the promotion of Madras High Court Chief Justice Indira Banerjee. The other two judges are R Banumathi, selected in August 2014, and Indu Malhotra, selected in April 2018.
Remarkably, Justice Geeta Mittal was selected as the Chief Justice of the Jammu and Kashmir High Court, who is the first female judge in the history to take over this position. [Indian Express]

Pakistan: National Assembly inaugural meeting to take place next week

(ot/am) The inaugural session of the new National Assembly is expected to convene next week on 13 or 14 August. The session will see the election of important positions, including the prime minister, and the transfer of power to the new government. In the meantime, The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) will have to complete all the legal formalities. Independents will be given time to decide whether they want to join any political party. The ECP will also issue the list of candidates for the reserved seats for women and minorities. [Pakistan Today]

The first female candidate for Pakistan's presidential elections, Fatima Jinnah,contested in 1965 in competition with Ayub Khan who she lost to. At present, 53 years later, Pakistan may be set to make history and pick the first female president of the country. Social media was rife with speculation that Justice (ret.) Nasira Iqbal, a Pakistani jurist and law professor who served as a justice of the Lahore High Court (LHC) for eight years until 2002, was being considered for the office of the President of Pakistan [Tribune].

Pakistan: Campaign formed to protest election results

(ot) Political parties have agreed to form "Pakistan Alliance for Fair and Free Elections" that will launch a campaign against the alleged rigging of the 25 July elections. The alliance consists of major political parties, including Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Muttahida Majilis Amal (MMA), and Awami National Party (ANP). They plan to launch a program of action for protests, both inside and outside the parliament. [Pakistan Today]

Pakistan: Report shows increase in excluded ballots

(ot) A report by the Free and Fair Elections Network (FAFEN), an independent election watchdog, found that total of 1.67 million votes in the 2018 general elections were excluded. A ballot is excluded if it fails to clearly show which candidate has been chosen or if more than one candidate has been marked.

According to the Election Commission of Pakistan, only about 51 percent out of 100 million registered voters exercised their right. The number of excluded ballot represented a 11.7 per cent increase from the 2013 polls and was observed in all provinces and Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT). [Financial Express, Geo TV]

Nepal: Rejection of chief justice candidate prompted warning of constitutional crisis

(ot) For the first time ever, the Parliamentary Hearing Committee (PHC) rejected the nomination of the chief justice of the Supreme Court. The PHC meeting, which was boycotted by Nepali Congress lawmakers, rejected the recommendation of the Constitutional Council led by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli to have Deepak Raj Joshee as chief justice of the Supreme Court. The PHC reasoned that Joshee failed to present his integrity, work efficiency, and behavior. [Kathmandu Post 1]

The Nepal Bar Association warned that the PHC decision directly interfered with the independent judiciary and could lead to a constitutional crisis and further legal difficulties. [Kathmandu Post 2]

Sri Lanka secures US$1 billion Chinese loan

(jm) The Island Nation that was warned in 2016 by the International Monetary Fund for its heavy debt has secured a US$1 billion Chinese loan according to its Central Bank. The first half of the loan will be released later this month and the balance will be received in October. Since Sri Lanka is a strategic partner for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, China repeatedly offered financial support to the island over the last years, but the International Community and the Sri Lankan population now fear that it could be debt trapped further [Channel News Asia].

Maldives: Ruling party and opposition accusing each other of sabotaging the presidential polls

(jm) One month before the presidential elections, the ruling party's secretary general has criticized the opposition for attempting sabotage the upcoming elections. Previously, the Defense Minister claimed on Facebook that he received credible reports of attempts to undermine peace and security in the Maldives. The opposition candidate Solih in return said that this was itself "a cheap attempt to either sabotage the upcoming presidential elections or to intimidate the public." [Avas]

Moreover, the opposition accused the ruling party and Election Commission of scheming to disenfranchise voters by requesting thousands of people to re-register for the election and collecting these re-registration forms. [Maldives Independent]

Maldives: Censorship over convicted political leaders

(jm) Two privately owned TV stations had to cut off their programs while they were broadcasting a video conference with the former president Mohamed Nasheed and JP leader Gasim Ibrahim. Indeed, the Home Ministry warned them of punitive actions if the stations kept promoting convicts. The Maldives Broadcasting Corporation had previously taken measures against one of these TV stations, including imposing a fine of MVR1 million (US$64,850), for airing a speech that was deemed defamatory towards President Abdulla Yameen. [Maldives Independent]

Moreover, following a call made by presidential candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, some opposition's

supporters put up campaign posters in the capital Male on Friday including pictures representing some of the top leaders that have been convicted. The police threatened immediate action against such efforts to gather support using the image of convicted criminals. [Avas]

Seychelles: The Committee on Truth, Reconciliation and National Unity bill approved

(jm) After the Committee on Truth, Reconciliation and National Unity was set up in 2017 to lay the groundwork for a transitional justice process, it introduced a bill to the National Assembly to create a Truth, Reconciliation and National Unity Commission that was approved on Wednesday. The 7 members commission (including 2 foreigners) will have the duty to investigate the abuses made during and after the Coup d'Etat that occurred in 1977, to listen to the victims and perpetrators ,and make decisions on how to go forth. [Seychelles News Agency]

Law and Politics in Southeast Asia

Malaysia: Anwar Ibrahim clearing hurdles on his (long) way to PM

(jk) Former Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) "adviser" Anwar Ibrahim has submitted his nomination papers to contest for the presidency post in the upcoming party polls and won the presidency of PKR uncontested. This is another important step if Malaysia is serious about its plan to implement Anwar as Mahathir's successor.

He will still need to run in a by-election and be elected a member of parliament before he can be appointed premier in place of PM Mahathir Mohamad in about two years' time, as agreed with the ruling coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH). So far, there is little reason to believe the arrangement will change, but it is still very early on of course [Strait Times].

Cambodia: Militarisation of government continues and Hun Sen's oldest son

(jk) In the election last week, three of Cambodia's most senior military figures ran for parliament for Hun Sen's People's Party. And of course, won. As quoted before in AiR, CPG Senior Research Fellow Dr. Paul Chambers stated on the growing militarisation of Cambodia's leading party and the country's leadership: "By fielding so many military candidates, the CPP can further tighten the nexus between itself and military leaders, giving the latter more of the political pie." Now, with the result essentially in the bag, all three will be sworn in as parliamentarians later this month. Chambers holds that Hun Sen may well be looking to oversee a "camouflaged military autocracy" soon.

Another important military figure of particular interest is Hun Sen's oldest son, Hun Manet. He, according to opposition figures, already controls the armed forces, Hun Sen's bodyguard unit, the military police, the secret police, the anti-terrorist unit and has made progression in his military career by filling the senior military ranks left by those who progressed into politics. By conflating military and politics more and more, Hun Sen is seen to also prepare his own succession in favour of his oldest son. To end, again with Chambers, it is possible that "after the end of Hun Sen, there would likely be a grouping of senior military with Hun Manet as a figurehead." [SCMP]

Islamism and the New Anti-Terrorism Law in Indonesia

(jk) As reported back in May, Indonesia in the wake of the Surabaya bombings (also in May this year), has rushed a tough and broad anti-terror law through parliament. The law was proposed far earlier and had been deliberated about for a while, but the attacks seem to have dispersed human rights concerns among the legislators. The law allows police to preemptively detain suspects and prosecute those who join or

recruit for militant groups. In addition, special operations units from Indonesia's air force, army and navy are set to play a bigger role in the war on terror. The government has also blocked numerous websites containing radicalism. In addition to human rights and other concerns, it is doubtful whether the law will be enough to combat growing radical Islamism in Indonesia [ISEAS].

Indonesia: Former President Yudhoyono endorses Prabowo for presidency

(jk) Presidential elections in Indonesia are not until April next year, however, observers now are focused on the registration of presidential candidates for the poll which is due to be completed by August 10. Despite not being "natural" political allies, former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has endorsed Parbowo to run against current President Joko Widodo in a re-run of the 2014 presidential election where the two were already candidates. SBY and Prabowo were both former Army generals. [Strait Times]

Thailand: Government confirms extradition request for exiled PM

(ot) The Thai government confirmed that it has officially requested the extradition of ousted PM Yingluck Shinawatra believed to be living in Britain.

A letter dated 5 July 2018 from the Thai embassy in London to the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office showed the embassy, upon instruction of the Thai government, asking the UK government to extradite the former prime minister. It referred to a treaty on the extradition of fugitive criminals between both countries signed in 1911 which prohibits extradition for political offenses, but the letter assures that the case against Yingluck was a corruption case and not a political one. The embassy also asked that the request be "kept strictly confidential and executed as a matter of urgency". [BBC Thai, in Thai]

However, in response, Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said the action was not a policy matter, but a normal legal procedure by the police and public prosecutors. Don said he could not recall seeing any document seeking his approval for the extradition request. PM Prayut also stressed that the decision on whether Yingluck will be extradited lies with the UK

government, and not the Thai law enforcement. [The Nation]

Yingluck and her administration was overthrown by the 2014 military coup led by the ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). She fled the country last year shortly after the Supreme Court convicted her of malfeasance for mishandling a rice subsidy program. She was sentenced in absentia to 5 years in prison. It was widely believed that Yingluck sought asylum in Britain after photos and video clips of her and her supporters appeared on various social media sites. She also reportedly obtained a multiple-entry visa from the UK government. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Former diplomat named election commission chairman

(ot) Former Thai ambassador to the Netherlands Ittiporn Boonpracong has been selected as the new chairman of the Election Commission (EC), although two seats of the body remain empty. Earlier in July, the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) approved five candidates for the seven-post commission and rejected two candidates. Some critics argued that, despite the law allowing five commissioners to selected a chairman, it can only be done after all seven commissioners have been installed. [Bangkok Post, Thairath, in Thai]

Thailand: Regime filed complaints against new anti-junta party

(ot) The military junta lodged police complaints against Future Forward Party figures for critical comments against the regime.

The ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) filed complaints against leader of the Future Forward party Thanatorn Juangroongruangkit and some other party figures, accusing them of provoking public disturbance, in violation of the Computer Crimes Act. Under the law, any person who imports false information that may compromise national security, public safety, economic security or infrastructure, or cause panic among the public into computer systems could be sentenced to up to five years in prison. The accusation stemmed from the live broadcast on their Facebook pages in which Thanathorn criticized the junta's campaign to woo politicians to join Phalang Pracharat Party, while other

political parties are still being restricted by a ban on political activities. The Phalang Pracharat was allegedly set up to support Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha's return as premier after the next general elections. [Bangkok Post 1]

The party hit back at the junta, accusing it of abusing the power to suppress political dissidents and damaging the country's image. Thanathorn also reaffirmed his right and said he would continue making critical comments on his regular Facebook broadcasts. [Bangkok Post 2, The Nation]

A NCPO spokesperson insisted that the legal action was not intended to intimidate the party, but was in line with the law because the party distorted information that adversely affected the NCPO's reputation. He also clarified that the NCPO has no plan to detain anybody for "attitude adjustment". [Bangkok Post, The Nation]

Thailand: Human trafficking remains a serious issue due to failure in law enforcement

(ot) The human rights organization Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF) and Anti-Labor Trafficking Project in a joint report said Human trafficking remains prevalent in Thailand. The report, which monitored the situation of human trafficking from 2016 to 2017, found that most cases of human trafficking in the country involved sex trade and persons being forced into prostitution. Labor trafficking, especially in the agriculture and fishing industries, are still rife as well. The report also suggested that despite years of effort by the military government to tackle the issue, including by passing legislation and legal amendments in light of the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, the problems come from the inefficient enforcement of the laws by authorities. In addition, the low number of cases was due to poor record-keeping and lack of cooperation among relevant government agencies. [The Nation, Prachatai]

Myanmar: 275 political prisoners in Myanmar, group says

(jm) According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, an independent non-profit organization of former Myanmar political prisoners,

there are currently 275 people imprisoned for their political activities in the country. 36 political prisoners were released in April under the President's amnesty. It seems that most of the prisoners were arrested on suspicion of violating the Unlawful Association Act. The group urged the government to revise the law in order to protect citizens' rights, so peace and reconciliation can be reached. It also threatened the government that it will submit a report to the Human Right Commission if it receives news of torture of political prisoners, claiming that the "use of tortures to get information from detainees is still common in detention centers and prisons." [Myanmar Times]

Myanmar: UN council to commemorate Myanmar crackdown on Rohingya

(jm) The British Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) announced that the UN Security Council (UNSC) is planning to commemorate the one-year anniversary of Myanmar's violent crackdown that led about 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh on August 28. The meeting will aim to push Myanmar to grant "unconditional access" to the UN refugee and development agencies in order to establish "a credible plan to get the refugees back home in safety, dignity and security."

UN human rights chief, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, has called for the issue to be referred to the International Criminal Court, however, the referral would have to be made by the UNSC, in which China holds veto-power and is likely to use it on this issue. [The Herald Whig]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

US passes bill to waive sanctions on India over Russian arms

(am) The US Senate approved a bill relinquishing sanctions against India for procuring Russian weaponry. The bill, known as National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) 2019, has now been referred for President Donald Trump's endorsement. Previously, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said India will procure the Russian S-400 air defence systems in spite of US sanctions on military trades with Russia. [HT]

Indian Army takes part in Chinese Army's 91st foundation day

(am) A Special Border Personnel get-together was held in Sikkim's Nathu La last Wednesday among the armies of India and China as part of celebrations to honour the 91st centenary of the foundation of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Indian Army attended the celebration following an invitation by the PLA. The countries participated in several cultural programs. [HT]

China: Boosting military strength

(dql) China's air force announced that the country's J-16s fighter jets will soon be ready for military operations, following a successful combat training exercise of a squadron of J-16s. According to military observers the J-16 has been specifically developed for potential campaigns against Taiwan given the focus of its armament on anti-ship and ground attack missions. [South China Morning Post]

In a related development, the China Academy of Aerospace Aerodynamics confirmed that a new hypersonic aircraft has been successfully tested. The aircraft is said to be able to outmaneuver modern defense systems and one day be used to deliver missiles.[Inkstone]

China-US trade dispute: New round of tariff threats

(dql) In the latest round of the Sino-US tit-for-tat tariffs spiral, Beijing announced that it would add more taxes to 60 billion USD in US goods [Quartz] as a retaliatory measure against plans of the Trump administration to propose slapping a 25-percent tariff on 200 billion USD of imported Chinese goods after initially setting them at 10 percent.[Reuters]

In the wake of the escalating trade dispute and concerns that China will fare much worse in a full-fledged trade war than the US, President Xi is facing hitherto unknown domestic criticism of his economic and foreign policy, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the island-building in the South China Sea, and the strategic partnership with Russia viewed as too costly, ambitious, risky and confrontational, Minxin Pei writes in [Nikkei Asian Review].

Belt and Woes Myanmar Edition: Chinese backed port project under scrutiny

(jk) The perception of the Chinese Belt and Road project is slowly changing, even in the countries most depended on Chinese money. The much discussed Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, which was given to the Chinese on an extensive lease after the country was unable to honour their loan repayment commitments to the People's Republic. Far from being the only example, Hambantota port has made the rounds as a negative example of what the Chinese infrastructure investments can lead to if not dealt with carefully. Chinese investment often comes in the form of concessional loans from Chinese policy banks. Nonetheless, concessionality varies and it is financing that needs to be paid back, with interest. And to the lenders it matters little whether the project delivers domestic economic benefits or not. This can be in contrast to development aid from other countries or organisations, which often comes in the form of grants. It is also different to private investments, which are usually based on sound and extensive economic

calculations. Investments are vetted and, in most cases, they will happen only if there is strong reason to believe there will be return on the investment. But in particular port projects, for example in Malaysian under the previous government, have created some suspicion around the fact that the current Malaysian ports are already working below capacity, so suspicion as to Chinese (or Malaysian) motives is valid.

China has thus far invested in over 40 ports ranging from Africa, Europe, to the Indian-Ocean and to Southeast Asia and beyond [GB Times].

Myanmar, which up until this point had been an unlikely candidate to reconsider Chinese investment has done exactly that. A key port for the Chinese infrastructure project on the western tip of Myanmar's conflict-torn Rakhine state is now under massive scrutiny for its development plans. The initial $7.3bn price tag on the Kyaukpyu deep-water port, was too much for the Myanmar government to accept, especially after witnessing what happened in Sri Lanka. The aim is to scale down the port project significantly to around $1bn, an amount the country is more likely to be able to repay [The Guardian]. The port is strategically important as it would help China to re-route energy imports that way and alleviate its "Malacca-dilemma", referring to the chocking point of the Malacca strait through which most of Chinese energy imports flow.

Inaugural ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise held

(jk) In this two-day exercise, the first between ASEAN and China, naval officers from all 11 countries discussed tackling scenarios, such as search and rescue operations, and medical evacuation. The exercises were hosted by the Republic of Singapore Navy and there are plans to hold field exercises in China later this year.

There are also plans to use the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in the field exercise which is meant to manage unexpected encounters in the sea, and was adopted by ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus countries in 2017 [Strait Times]. Although the other "plus" countries Japan and South Korea have also signed the CUES, they are not taking part in the exercises.

China had also proposed regular military exercises with ASEAN countries that would reportedly not involve countries outside the region (read: the US).

Interestingly, Filipino Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said that “we find nothing objectionable to the fact that China would want to exclude non-Asians from the military exercise. I think the contemplation of Chinese authorities is to have military cooperation amongst neighbors.” [Manila Bulletin]

ASEAN-China Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct

(jk) The 10 foreign ministers of the member states of ASEAN and their Chinese counterpart announced agreement on a Single Draft South China Sea Code of Conduct Negotiating Text that will serve as the basis for the adoption of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea at the ASEAN-China Ministerial Meeting, one of several related meetings held alongside the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Singapore this week [Strait Times].

The draft is another step in talks that have been going on for over a decade on a final code of conduct (CoC) that will lay the foundation for solving disputes in the South China Sea. Whilst some observers, especially from ASEAN and China, stress the progress that has been made and the fact the negotiations are delivering some results, many observers are much more critical. The progress is once again marginal at best and a final solution is as far away as ever. Furthermore, China-critical voices – mainly from Vietnam within and the US outside of ASEAN, allege that China will (1) use the Code of Conduct talks to delay, exploit, and divert focus from any ASEAN consensus on the South China Sea; (2) seek to include unhelpful and imprecise language in the CoC which it could then use to justify its actions; and (3) nonetheless claim the CoC as a diplomatic success and will use it as cover to avoid criticism while still pursuing its unilateral strategy to control the South China Sea [AMTI].

Japan, Russia at odds over Tokyo’s plan to deploy missile defense systems

(dql) The latest, third round of “two-plus-two” meetings between the Foreign and Defense Ministers of Japan and Russia after 2013 and 2017 concluded with mixed results. While both sides agreed to cooperate in realizing the denuclearization of North Korea and increase security cooperation, they remained opposed over Tokyo’s plan to introduce two Aegis Ashore missile defense systems by 2023, a move Moscow

views as strengthening U.S. missile systems in the Asia-Pacific region. [The Japan Times]

Inter-Korean detente: North Korea releases South Korean detained for illegal entry to the North

(dql) Illustrating further improvement of inter-Korean ties since the Moon-Kim summit in April, Pyongyang release a South Korean man arrested in July after illegally crossing the border into the North. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, new U.S.-backed guidelines to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to North Korea were approved by the committee which monitors sanctions on North Korea for the UN Security Council. [CBS]

Thai Government rejects calls against Thailand's ASEAN chairmanship

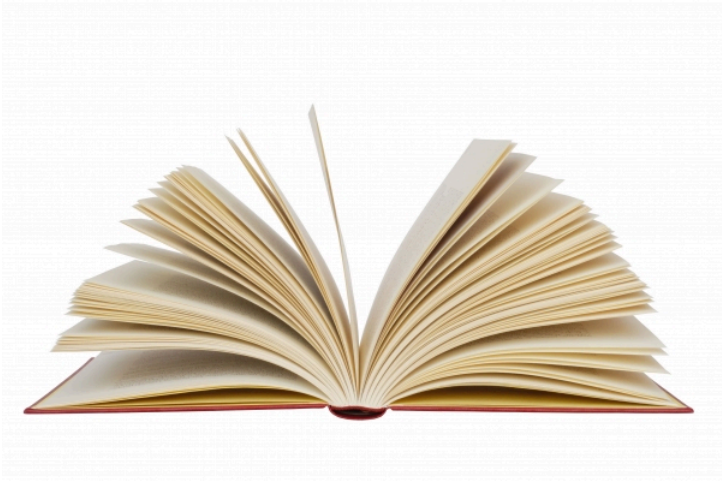
(ot) An Indonesian columnist wrote an article, calling on the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to deny Thai Prime Minister and junta leader General Prayut Chan-O-Cha the regional grouping's rotating chairmanship until an election is held in the country. As Thailand is scheduled to become the chair of the ASEAN next year, the columnist opined that "the Thai junta does not deserve the position amid strong waves of democratization in the region." The article also cited the case of Myanmar, which was once dismissed of its ASEAN chairmanship in 2006 in an effort to pressure the country towards democratization in the then-military-ruled country. The Thai government denounced the columnist's comment, saying that the country has made substantial contribution to the region and provided its cooperation to the member countries. [The Nation 1]

The issue was widely discussed in the country, especially among political dissidents. General Prayut urged the Thais not to politicize the issue to cause further division in the country [The Nation 2].

The Philippines is looking at Russia as "possible sources" of submarines

(jk) Since President Rodrigo Duterte took office in 2016, Russian warships have made four port visits to the Philippines and a visit of a Philippine Navy ship to Vladivostok is planned. The two Navies have vowed to increase cooperation and signed a MoU at a visit of the PN Vice Admiral to St. Petersburg at the end of July. The Philippines have also expressed interest in acquiring Russian submarines [Inquirer].

Background Reading



U.S. Relations with Southeast Asia in 2018: More continuity than change

(jk) Acclaimed China scholar David Shambaugh writes on the overall state of the relations between the US and Southeast Asia. He finds that under Trump, although there has been rhetorical downgrading of the relationship, much of it is still a priority to Washington. Interestingly, he also describes that US regional presence is not very well appreciated or reported by regional media, whereas China's presence and influence is pervasive. Most Southeast Asian governments are often reluctant to recognize or publicize the U.S. presence or contributions to regional security, stability, and growth. Shambaugh also deals with the increasing great power competition in the region, and states that Southeast Asian countries will find themselves much more often to be objects of this competition and that they would be well-advised to make a stance in favour of relations with the US, who is a much more "comprehensive" actor than China. [ISEAS: Trends is Southeast Asia]

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